A Self of Sense

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Introduction

- This talk concerns those computer games known as *virtual worlds*
- They come in several flavours:
  - Text MUDs (including MOOs and MUSHes)
    - *LambdaMOO* is perhaps the best known
  - Graphical MUDs (currently known as MMORPGs)
    - *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*, *Lineage* and 100+ others.
- The same basic rules apply to all of these
  - So I'll simply be referring to "virtual worlds"
- Warning: this talk contains twice as much material as fits in the time allotted
  - Strap on your crash helmet, we'll be travelling at speed!

Gratuitous Screenshot

- From *Star Wars Galaxies*

An Assertion

- Virtual worlds are about the *celebration of identity*
  - Hence the relevance to SELFWARE
- Academics noticed this in the mid-1990s
  - Turkle's group at MIT
- What they didn't realise is that virtual worlds are *designed* with this in mind
- Neither do most designers
  - They inherit ideas from earlier paradigms
  - They don't consider *why* things are the way they are
- Similarly, players pass their cultural values from generation to generation
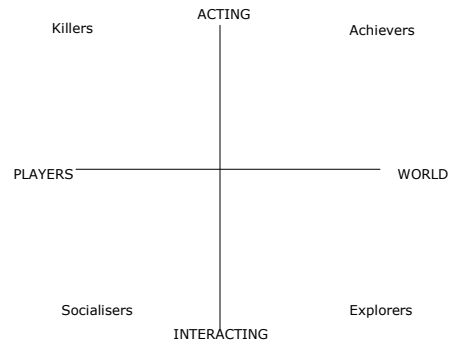 - Example: acceptability cross-gender play

But…

- Doesn't this imply that earlier designers knew what they were doing?
- It does, and they did:
  - Nearly all today's virtual worlds descend from the very first one, *MUD*
  - *MUD* was explicitly designed to promote identity exploration
  - Its culture was deliberately shaped to promote identity exploration
- Yeah, right… So tell me how it works
  - That's what the rest of this talk concerns

Overview

- So, I'm going to provide a theory of identity exploration for virtual worlds
  - This is described in detail in my forthcoming book
  - I'm not going to tell you its title, though, or you'll think I'm only here to plug it…
- I'll be showing that:
  - Players find different kinds of thing "fun"
  - As they play, their idea of what is "fun" changes along predictable lines
  - This is strongly related to the concept of *immersion*
  - As players progress, their "real" and "virtual" selves gradually align, until they find their "true" self
  - There's an age-old precedent for this

The Nature of Fun

```
                        ACTING
   Killers                │              Achievers
                          │
                          │
                          │
   PLYERS ────────────────┼──────────────── WORLD
                          │
                          │
                          │
   Socialisers            │              Explorers
                      INTERACTING
```

- The traditional player types model:
  - Some categories seem to have strong sub-categories
  - Suggests that players change type over time, but doesn't suggest *how*

A Third Dimension

- The player types graph has two dimensions
  - Player/world and active/interactive
- My original data suggested a third dimension
  - Implicit/explicit
- Example:
  - Griefers act on players in an implicit fashion
  - Politicians ("den mothers") act on them in an explicit fashion
- Adding this extra dimension gives us 8 player types instead of 4

New Player Types Graph
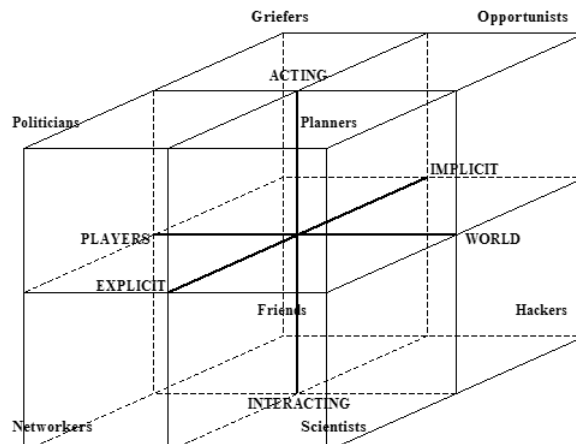

- Each sub-cube represents a player type

What this Buys

- It explains the difference between griefers and politicians if nothing else…
  - You can be a "killer" type and not "kill"
- Interactions between types can be explained with more fidelity
  - But I shan't be doing that today…
- The biggest bonus is that it allows the uncovering of *player development tracks*
  - I'll spend the next few slides talking about this

Player Development

- From very early days, it was observed that many players develop in the same way
  - They start off trying to kill one another
  - Then they move to exploring the virtual world
  - Then they try to "win" it
  - Then they settle down and socialise
- In player type terms:
  - Killer⇨explorer⇨achiever⇨socialiser
  - On new graph, it's griefer⇨scientist⇨planner⇨friend
- There are plenty of exceptions, though.
  - Many people start as opportunists
- Does the new graph reveal more sequences?

The Main Sequence
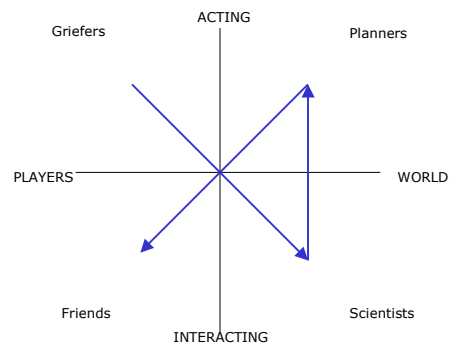
- Visible without implicit/explicit dimension
- Griefer⇨scientist⇨planner⇨friend
- Reverse-alpha shape

The Socialiser Sequence

ACTING

Griefers   Politicians

IMPLICIT   EXPLICIT

Friends   Networkers

INTERACTING
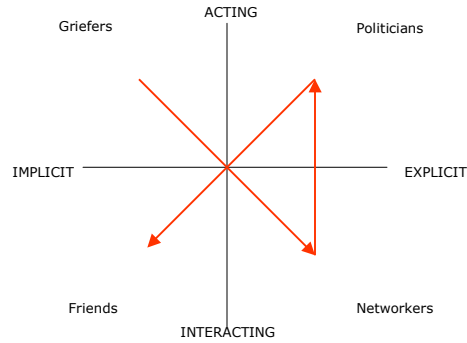
- Player half of player/world dimension
- Griefer⇨networker⇨politician⇨friend
  - On old graph, killer⇨socialiser⇨killer⇨socialiser

The Explorer Sequence

ACTING

Opportunists   Planners

IMPLICIT   EXPLICIT

Hackers   Scientists

INTERACTING
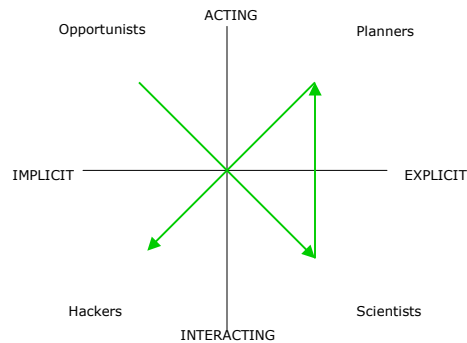
- World half of player/world dimension
- Opportunist⇨scientist⇨planner⇨hacker
  - Previously achiever⇨explorer⇨achiever⇨explorer

Minor Sequence
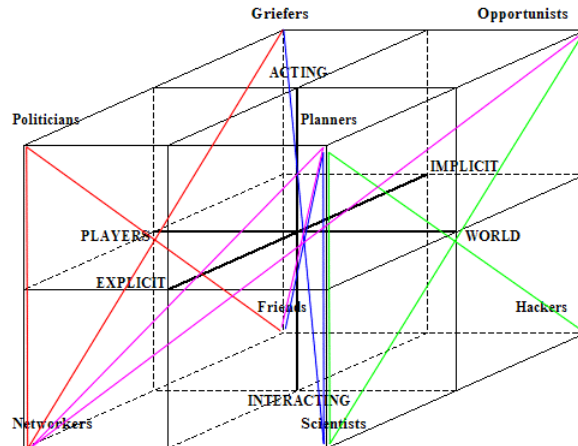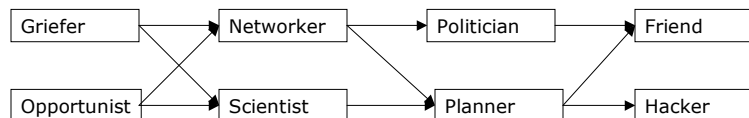

- Opportunist⇨networker⇨planner⇨friend

Development Tracks

- What we have here are 4 sequences
  - I obtained these from empirical observation
  - There may be others I've missed
- In general, players can switch arbitrarily between types as they learn more about themselves

- No off-sequence changes to or from politician
  - Worrying for symmetry fans…
- Designers influence speed of progression

What the Tracks Tell Us

- Each sequence starts off implicit, then goes explicit, then returns to implicit
- It's a *learning exercise*
  - Find what you can do – your *primitive actions*
  - Seek out meaningful combinations of these actions
  - Perform these combinations until they become second nature to you
  - Now these sequences are primitive actions for you!
- Locate, discover, apply, internalise
- It's how babies learn to walk
  - But what are the players learning?
  - Why do they find this kind of learning "fun"?

What the Tracks Give Players

- Development tracks deliver increasing *immersion*
  - The sense of being *in* a virtual world
- Levels of immersion:
  - Player, (subordinate), avatar, character, persona
- Important: it's not a 1-to-1 mapping
  - You can be persona-level immersed at planner
  - You can reach friend level while unimmersed
- This is unsatisfactory for players, though
  - Designers should aim to make full immersion (persona) and final development (friend/hacker) coincide

Immersion and Identity

- The more immersed you are, the more you become your virtual self and *vice versa*
  - Your virtual self is your initial "ideal"
  - Challenges cause identity drift in yourself *and* in your ideal
  - Eventually, the two align
- *This* is why people play virtual worlds
- The development tracks represent a progression designed to instil a greater sense of immersion
  - But most designers don't know that; their designs work merely through the legacy of earlier designs
- Q: What do players find fun in virtual worlds?
  - A: Whatever it takes to advance them along their preferred development track
- Their (almost always unacknowledged) goal is to *find themselves*

The Hero's Journey

- This state of affairs isn't unprecedented…
- Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*
- Has been applied in many narrative situations
  - *e.g.* Star Wars, Harry Potter…
- Has also been applied within virtual worlds
  - *e.g.* Shadowbane
- The difference here is that it's not a narrative for a *character*, it's a narrative for *you*
  - You are a real-world person, and the virtual world is the "other world" you visit
  - *You* get to be a hero – if you complete the journey
- The match isn't perfect, but let's take a look

Departure

- Call to adventure
    - Advertisement, cover disk, pushy friend…
- Refusal of the call
    - Lots of reasons not to play
- Supernatural aid
    - Step can be skipped if you don't need persuading
    - But contact with a ranking player or CS rep works
- Crossing of first threshold
    - Install the client software and power it up
- Belly of the whale
    - Character creation
    - A formal rebirth

Initiation (I)

- Road of trials
    - Small challenges that test extent of your abilities
    - (opportunist/griefer)
- Meeting with the goddess
    - Seek knowledge, through experiment or through others
    - (scientist/networker)
- Woman as the temptress
    - Are you in it for the long haul?
    - Transition from seeking to doing
- Atonement with the father
    - Attempt to "win" the game in terms of its achievement metrics
    - (planner/politician)
    - The key moment of virtual existence
    - Who is the "father"? The lead designer…

Initiation (II)

- Apotheosis
  - Challenges no longer seen as important
  - (friend/hacker)
- Ultimate boon
  - This is where it breaks down.
- Most developers don't want their players to leave, so don't give them a boon
  - Is that ethical?
- In my own games, we *do* give them a boon
  - and did so before I ever heard about Campbell's work!

Return (I)

- Refusal of return
  - You have power, respect, peace, friends… Why return?
- The magic flight
  - Live team tries to tempt you to stay
  - Add extra content
  - Offer you a position of authority
- Rescue from without
  - "Stop spending so much time on that computer"
  - It gives you the excuse you need to stop
- Crossing of the return threshold
  - You stop because you don't *need* to play any more
  - Not a clear threshold, though

Return (II)

- Master of the two worlds
  - Your virtual and real selves are the same
  - For you, the virtual world is a place like any other
  - It's lost its mythical significance
- Freedom to live
  - You can finally be yourself

Conclusion

- Playing virtual worlds is a kind of hill-climbing activity through identity space
- *The Hero's Journey* is a good algorithm for finding a local maximum, if not a global one
- Players follow predictable development tracks as they pursue their personal hero's journey
  - This is reflected in increasing immersion
- When your real-world self and your virtual-world self coalesce, your task is complete
- Designers need to understand all this, or they're doing their players a disservice
  - And if they do understand it but choose to carry on regardless..?